

LUNCH AND LEARN GANG: Up Close with Tennessee's Timber Rattlesnakes!

August 7, 12-1:00 p.m.

Region II Conference Room

"She (rattlesnake) never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage... she never wounds 'till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her." Quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin, 1775.

Most of us know the famous "Don't Tread on Me" flag, also called the Gadsden Flag, which shows a coiled rattlesnake ready to strike on a yellow background. But did you know that the timber rattlesnake was a serious contender for our national symbol and appeared on many early flags? In fact, during the birth of our nation it was not the bald eagle but the timber rattlesnake that served as the symbol of our country!

In 1754, the first illustration of a snake symbol, sketched, carved, and published by Benjamin Franklin, was the first known political cartoon printed in an American newspaper. It was the image of a snake cut into eight sections representing the individual colonies. Beneath the snake were the ominous words "Join, or Die."

By 1775, snake symbols were appearing all over the colonies, on uniform buttons, on paper money, and of course, on banners and flags. The symbol morphed quite a bit during its rapid, widespread adoption. It wasn't cut up into pieces anymore. And it was usually shown as a timber rattlesnake, not a generic serpent.

Since those early times of symbolic notoriety the unfortunate timber rattlesnake has been hunted and hounded to the brink of extinction in many areas of our country. What do we know about them today, especially here in Tennessee?

Danny L. Bryan, Assistant Professor of Biology at Cumberland University and our next Lunch and Learn Gang presenter, has been researching timber rattlers (*Crotalus horridus*) for nearly 20 years. He says that published studies of the snakes have been conducted in other states, but little is known about them in Tennessee. The timber rattler is protected from harvest in Tennessee and is listed as in need of management, however, much of the distribution data in Tennessee is antiquated, and the current status of the species is in question.

There are no bounties for timber rattlesnakes in Tennessee, however, public persecution and trophy status has led to the direct killing of many individuals. This along with cumulative effects of habitat destruction and collecting from the wild have all contributed to a negative impact on the species, possibly leading to future extirpation (becoming locally extinct).

Danny's project is to determine the rattler's current status at Center Hill Lake and elsewhere in Middle Tennessee. By capturing them, implanting transmitters and then releasing them, he hopes to learn more about snake movements and repopulation before encroaching development endangers them even more. Pete Wyatt, TWRA Region IV Nongame and Endangered Species Biologist, is a co-researcher on this federal project along with other biologists from state and federal resource agencies, private conservation groups, universities, and the private domain. Hopefully conservation actions derived from the collected data could save this species from being extirpated in Tennessee and other states.

So come to the next Lunch and Learn Gang program and find out why these so-called "bad" animals are an important part of our Tennessee landscape.

Hosted by the I&E Department and held on the first Thursday of each month, except July, Lunch and Learn Gang presentations are about natural resource related topics and last about 30-45 minutes, allowing time for discussion during the allotted lunch hour. If you would like to make a presentation, if you have topics of personal interest you would like us to address, or if you know someone who offers an interesting program, contact Patricia Miller at (615) 781-5276 or by e-mail: Patricia.Miller@state.tn.us.